MARY McGRORY

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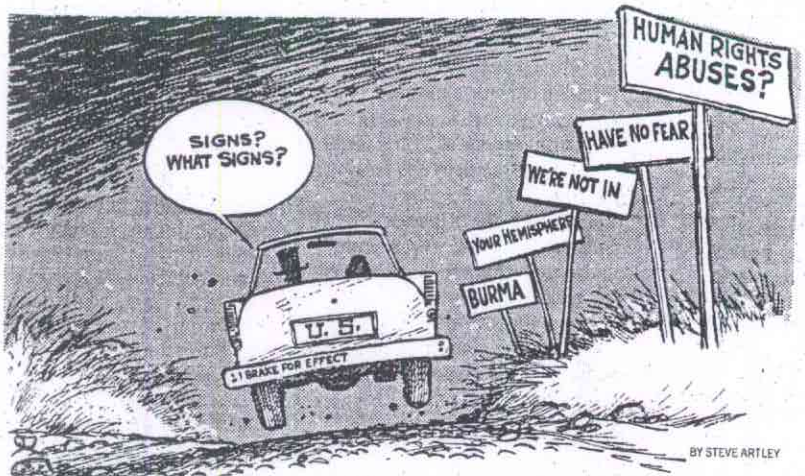
Human Rights, Presidential Wrongs

Lucky for John Shattuck, head of the State Department's human rights office, that the theme of the evening was already set: the plight of women and children who are victims of human rights abusers. The occasion, at the Italian Embassy, was to honor the winner of a new Amnesty International award, named after the Italian Resistance heroine, Ginetta Sagan. The first recipient was a small, bright-eyed woman named Mangala Sharma, who founded an organization to help her sister refugees in her native Bhutan—victims, like herself, of political violence and repression.

Shattuck's personal commitment to human rights is not in question—he was once a member of Amnesty International's board—but the same cannot be said for the Clinton administration. Members of the human rights community don't have the heart to criticize Shattuck. They are fond of him. Behind his back they say the best thing he could do for the oppressed of the world is to resign, and perhaps shame Bill Clinton into the kind of militancy he promised when he first ran for president in 1992.

See McGRORY, C2, Col. 1



Trading In Our Morality

McGRORY, From C1

Shattuck's instructions left him free to talk about women's rights, a cause to which Hillary Clinton is strongly committed. He could even brag about the "integration" of women's rights into the human rights movement and avoid entirely the subject of China, the world's worst human rights violator.

China was much on the minds of those at the gathering. The night before, human rights activists had gathered at the New York Public Library to pay homage to China's most famous political prisoner, Wei Jingsheng, an eloquent and valiant dissident who is spending his 17th year in jail for advocating democracy. The Chinese regime has been peppered with pleas from world leaders to let him go, with the usual results. China ignores them.

Wei has been given honors—the Robert Kennedy Human Rights Award, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, the Olof Palme Award of the European Parliament. John Shattuck saw Wei during the six-month interval between Wei's first prison sentence in 1979 and his second in 1994, and this meeting was used against Wei at his sham second trial. Wei's extraordinary letters from prison have been collected in a book under the title "The Courage to Stand Alone." His tone is grave and, even in letters addressed to high authority, breathtakingly bold.

Two California members of Congress at the embassy reception—one from the left (Democrat Nancy Pelosi) and one from the right (Republican Dana Rohrabacher) told Shattuck that the Clinton strategy of decoupling trade issues from human rights violations was obviously not working. A growing number in Congress are preparing to vote against a renewal of China's most favored nation status. Conservatives are joining, but probably not enough to override a presidential veto. Thank the China lobby.

Clinton's indulgence toward China distorts and dominates our feeble human rights effort in other parts of the world. Now, when we try to do the right thing, the offenders just snicker. In Burma, for example, the obduracy of the colonels who stand in the way of democracy and democratically elected leader Aun San Suu Kyi finally led the U.S. government to issue a ban on new investments. "So what?" said the colonels, knowing from China that we were only kidding.

When questioned about the contrast, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave an airy answer that illustrated the Clinton administration's detachment on a subject that requires strong convictions: "We have consistent principles and flexible tactics."

Like Shattuck, Albright is personally popular and believable, if only because of her own compelling personal history. But despite her promise to "tell it like it is" on human rights, she has notably not done so.

Nobel Prize winner Oscar Arias Sanchez, former president of Costa Rica, observed to William Goodfellow of the Center for International Politics during a visit to Washington that "the U.S. is blowing its opportunity to become a moral superpower."

Compare U.S. policy in Cuba and China, and you see why. We have thrown an embargo around the small island in response to Miami's fanatic and noisy Cuban exile population. By forbidding sales of medicine and food, we end up punishing the very people we are trying to save, far more than we are hurting Castro. And, you may well ask, if the administration believes that Cubans would revolt if austerely treated, why wouldn't we apply the same theory to Chinese?

It makes no sense. Maybe it would be better to declare human rights a dead policy and give it a decent burial. Say it died for lack of presidential leadership. Say it expired during Vice President Gore's trip to China, when he was trapped into toasting the butcher of Tiananmen Square and did not allow the words human rights to fall from his lips.

People who want to trade with China are big campaign givers. That could be one of the reasons campaign finance reform is barely breathing. The cause the president said was consuming him is forgotten in the swirl of fund-raising at every meal in Washington. Many hearts were saddened on Tuesday to see that Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), cosponsor of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill, was on the menu of the Republican extravaganza that brought in $11 million. McCain insists reform is still alive, if not well. "Wait till they have to vote on any part of it," he promises, "you'll see their fear of the issue."

Human rights and campaign reform—both worthy causes. Too bad they have to die this way.